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CULTURAL WARS AT COLUMBINE

THE COLUMBINE SHOOTINGS generated a huge religious controversy. In the “basement videotapes” Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold made prior to the shootings, they vilified evangelicals. During their rampage, they insulted and attempted to humiliate students whom they knew were deeply religious. Although there is no evidence that they specifically targeted them, when they came across students who they knew were evangelicals, they were more vicious with them than with other students. Perhaps the most celebrated and bizarre aspect of the shootings was the beatification of Cassie Bernall as a Christian martyr who died proclaiming her faith.

The Columbine shootings provided the grist for a minor cottage industry of books about religion in Columbine. First were hagiographies of Rachel Scott (Nimmo and Klingsporn 2001; Nimmo, Scott, and Rabey 2000; Scott and Rabey 2001) and Cassie Bernall (1999), each of which had a parent as author or coauthor. Second came numerous books and articles written primarily for evangelical audiences and secondarily for the general public. These proclaimed the religious message of the Columbine shootings. Chief among these publications were *Martyr's Torch: the Message of the Columbine Massacre* (Porter 1999); *Day of Reckoning: Columbine and the Search for America's Soul* (Zoba 2000) and *Columbine: Questions That Demand an Answer* (Epperhart 2002). Most recently, Justin Watson, a professor of

religious studies at Le Moyne College published *The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy* (Watson 2002), an academic and dispassionate analysis of the religious overtones of the shootings.

Surprisingly, what began as a side issue overwhelmed media attention as evangelicals pressed the case that their children were being targeted because of their beliefs, alluding to the persecution of Christians in Rome prior to the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century. Rachel Scott and Cassie Bernall, unlike their fellow victims, were raised to the status of martyrs who died defending their faith (Watson 2002). The emergence of religion as an issue in shootings that occurred in a public school raises several questions. First, to what extent did Harris and Klebold target evangelicals in their rampage? Second, why did they evince hostility toward evangelical students? Third, why did religious persecution emerge as a major issue over the Columbine shootings?

CHRISTIANS IN THE CROSS HAIRS

Following the Columbine shootings, a struggle emerged between several factions over the ownership of the Columbine shootings (Cullen 1999e). That is, how should Columbine be defined and understood? In retrospect, it is clear that the antievangelical theme of the shootings received much greater play than the facts warranted. There are several reasons for this phenomenon. First, and most important, Columbine is situated in one of the most conservative areas of the country. Within fifty miles of Columbine are the headquarters of Focus on the Family, an evangelical organization that, under the guise of education, promotes a conservative political agenda, and the Promise Keepers, founded by former football coach Bill McCartney from the University of Colorado, that advocates a muscular Christianity whereby men are exhorted to take back the authority of their families that they have putatively ceded to their wives (Cooper 1995; Cullen 1999a). In addition, the Christian Coalition (The Christian Coalition 2003), one of the largest conservative lobbying groups in the country, which is opposed to abortion, cloning, and homosexuality and is hostile to political free speech, has in this area one of its largest chapters. Second, shortly after the shootings, rumors surfaced stating that Harris and Klebold had taunted some of their victims about their religious beliefs. When *Time Magazine* (Gibbs and Roche 1999) revealed the antievangelical comments of the boys in the basement tapes, the worst fears of evangelicals were realized. Third, the evangelical community, beginning in the 1980s, has built itself a universe parallel to secular society, consisting of churches, schools, communities, consumer goods, electronic

media, book publishers, and social services that are affluent, self-contained, influential, and form the core of President Bush's "faith-based initiative" (Talbot 2000). Therefore, they had the institutional wherewithal to promote their view of the Columbine shootings.

However, one undeniable fact confronts conservatives and evangelicals: the shootings happened in their backyard, not in the Sodom and Gomorrah of San Francisco or New York. However much they declaim secular humanism, the lack of prayer in schools, failure to put the Ten Commandments in school rooms, moral relativism, permissiveness, progressive education, and other liberal bugbears (Huckabee 1998; Porter 1999; Zoba 2000), undeniably the most vicious school crime occurred in a conservative community that was overwhelmingly white and Christian in a school that had a reputation for having well-behaved students, good sportsmanship, and strong school spirit. As the Reverend Bruce Porter (Porter 1999), minister of the evangelical church attended by Rachel Scott and her family, put it, "[T]his slaughter of innocents . . . occurred in MY town, down the street from MY church, and on MY watch" (68, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, rampage shootings have overwhelmingly occurred in conservative suburban and rural communities predominantly in the South and West (Newman 2004).

The evangelical and political right lashed out at secular society, especially the constitutional separation of church and state. Porter (1999) was fairly typical in his funeral oration for Rachel Scott:

We removed the Ten Commandments from our schools. In exchange, we've reaped selfish indifference and glorified hedonism. . . . We removed prayer from our schools and we've reaped violence and hatred and murder. And we have the fruit of those activities before us now. I want to say to you here today, that prayer was established again in our public schools last Tuesday [N.B.: April 20, 1999]. What the judiciary couldn't do, what the churches couldn't do, the children did themselves. The Duke of Wellington once said, "If you divorce religion from education, you produce a race of clever devils" (32).

THE EVANGELICALS TAKE OVER THE MEMORIAL SERVICE

After the initial shock, the evangelical community sought to define the shootings in religious terms, as a Manichean struggle between good and evil. Zoba (2000) noted that the memorial service for the dead and wounded students and

their families was taken over by evangelical pastors and turned into a revival service complete with threats of hellfire and brimstone. The memorial was supposed to be nondenominational and inclusive of educational and political leaders. Vice President Al Gore was there, representing the Clinton Administration. On the dais, and participating in the services were General Colin Powell; William Owens, the governor of Colorado; the superintendent of the Jefferson County School District, Jane Hammond; and Frank DeAngelis, the principal of Columbine High School. The service itself included a rabbi even though there are not enough Jews in the Columbine and Littleton area to form a congregation.

Following the comments of local political dignitaries, Jerry Nelson, pastor of Southern Gables Evangelical Free Church in Littleton, made the following remarks:

It was during World War II, and Betsy Tambune of Holland was lying nearly dead in a Nazi concentration camp. In spite of her tragic circumstances, and because of them, she spoke with confidence of God's love for her and of God's control of her life. Lying nearby, a woman raised her recently crushed and deformed hands and fingers, and she snarled back at Betsy's confidence, "My name is Maria Pracik. I was first violinist of the Warsaw Symphony. Did your God of love control this?" With tears of empathy forming in Betsy's eyes she softly responded, "I don't know. I only wish you knew my Jesus." What Betsy was saying is this, there is only one rational way to live without despair in a world of such pain, and that way is to know the son of God, Jesus Christ. He loves you and he died for you.... He says, "For God [so] loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have life everlasting" (Savidge 1999).

The rabbi was offended by the remarks, which implied that Christians had a better chance at survival of the Holocaust than Jews because of their faith in Jesus. To Jews, such a homily denigrates their suffering in the Holocaust and raises the genocidal behavior of German Christians to a glorification of Christ. If that was not sufficiently offensive, Franklin Graham, the son of the Reverend Billy Graham, followed Pastor Nelson with the following comments:

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you trusted

him as your savior? Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the light. No man comes unto the father but by me.”

It is time for this nation to recognize that when we empty the public schools of the moral teachings and the standards of a holy God, they are indeed very dangerous places. My friends, to be prepared, we must be willing to confess our sins, repent of our sins, and ask God for His forgiveness and to receive his son Jesus Christ by faith into our hearts and into our lives. God will forgive us and He’ll cleanse us of all of our sins. And He’ll give us a new heart and a new spirit and a new beginning. And He will give us the hope and assurance that one day we will be with Him in heaven (Savidge 1999).

Franklin managed to invoke the name of Jesus Christ eight times in a non-denominational service broadcast to the entire country. He also lent credence to the myth that Cassie Bernall died defending her faith:

A few nights ago, I was inspired while listening to Larry King interview a young girl, a student, from the high school, Mickie Cain. She told of her friend Cassie. As the killer rushed into the library and pointed his gun and asked her the life-or-death question, “Do you believe in God?” She paused and then answered, “Yes, I believe.” Those were the last words this brave 17-year-old Christian would ever say. The gunman took her life, and I believe that Cassie went immediately into the presence of Almighty God. She was ready. She was ready (Savidge 1999).

Not only were Jews offended, but also members of liberal Protestant sects. They were particularly unhappy about the evangelical takeover of the supposedly nondenominational memorial service. The Reverend Don Marxhausen, pastor of St. Philip Lutheran Church in Littleton, who served as de facto leader of local Protestant churches and who officiated over the small, private funeral for Dylan Klebold, was quoted as feeling “offended,” and “hit over the head with Jesus” (Cullen 1999a). Reverend Marxhausen related the event to me:

The guy told one Holocaust story, only two-and-a-half minutes, and he managed to insult every Jew in America. The rabbi was such a gracious man—I was on the podium with him. But anyway, so, there was a reporter there from the *Denver Post*, and she said something like, “Do you have a quote to say?” And I said, “You mean, Hail Mary, we got hit over the head with Jesus?” And I said, yeah, that’s what happened, ‘cause

I felt like I was getting hit. Then the hate mail came . . . because you can't complain about Franklin Graham. But a lot of other people said, thank you, thank you, thank you. So, when you step out front you get it from both sides (Recorded April 29, 2004).

Zoba (2000) relates that:

“The consensus was that it [N.B.: the memorial service] was not inclusive to all the communities,” said the Rev. Michael Carrier, president of the Interfaith Alliance of Colorado and pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church in Littleton. “I felt like [Franklin Graham] was trying to terrorize us into heaven instead of loving us into heaven. The service was supposed to be for all people of Colorado and the nation to find solace, not an evangelical Christian service” (140).

Members of evangelical community defended the service as representative of the Columbine community. Some evangelical leaders admitted that the service was heavily evangelical. Zoba (2000) quoted an evangelical pastor who said, “I understand where [the critics] were coming from. I didn't disagree with anything that was said or represented at the service, but I might have disagreed with the timing” (141).

Also disturbing to many viewers was the fact that all of the participants in the memorial service were Caucasians, even though two of the victims were persons of color: Isaiah Sholes was African American and Kyle Velasquez was Hispanic (Cullen 1999a). The composition of the memorial service reflected the covert racism in Columbine, paralleling the vicious racism displayed by Klebold and Harris.

RACHEL SCOTT AND CASSIE BERNALL: FROM VICTIMS TO CHRISTIAN MARTYRS

The memorial service was held on April 25, 1999, five days after the shootings. Already, the religious overtones of the shootings were asserting themselves. Both Cassie Bernall and Rachel Scott had been elevated to Christian martyrdom. Earlier that day, Rachel was described by her peers in the service as “full of life, clever, confident, warm, and unfailingly kind” (Watson 2002, 52). Several testimonies referred to her middle name, “Joy,” as emblematic of her because of her ability to bring happiness to others. Her reputation for being a good person transcended

the evangelical community. A self-identified “outcast” student indicated extreme respect for Rachel and stated, “Rachel was a New Christian, and she did it the right way” (Recorded May, 13, 2003).

Rev. Bruce Porter officiated over Rachel Scott’s memorial service, which was televised worldwide by CNN and MSNBC (Watson 2002). In addition to the savaging of the First Amendment cited above, he set the stage with the establishment of his “torchgrab ministry”:

Rachel carried a torch—a torch of truth, a torch of compassion, a torch of love, a torch of the good news of Jesus Christ her Lord, whom she was not ashamed of, even in her death. I want to lay a challenge before each and every one of you young people here today: the torch has fallen from Rachel’s hand. Who will pick it up again? Who will pick up the torch again... ?

I am hereby issuing a challenge to every student in every school across this nation. Pick up the torch that Rachel carried. Pick it up and hold it high and stop being a victim. Be proactive, speak to the culture you live in, declare a “cultural revolution” of compassion and mercy and love and forsake violence. You have the power within your hands, young people. We can’t do it. We have failed (Porter 1999, 34–35).

Porter (1999) described his audience as enthusiastic and leaping to their feet when he issued that challenge. According to Watson, Porter’s oration transformed Rachel into a figure to be venerated. He referred to her on his web site as “one of the Christian martyrs who died in Columbine High School” (Watson 2002, 54). In the days following the funeral, Porter stated that he received hundreds of e-mails, cards, letters, and telephone calls from people who heard his oration. He published numerous testimonials from Christians all over the world. A nonevangelical student who was at the service described Porter’s oration as a crass attempt to use the media to expand his ministry. He noted that up until that point, the memorial service was about Rachel, but then it became about Bruce Porter.

Cassie Bernall achieved even greater celebrity as a martyr than Rachel Scott. Early in the police investigation, a student misattributed Dylan Klebold’s asking Valeen Schnurr whether or not she believed in God to Cassie Bernall. An article in the *Rocky Mountain News* on April 23 was dedicated to Cassie’s profession of faith in the face of a shotgun barrel. It was repeated in an article on April 25. On April 27, the *Rocky Mountain News* printed an article about Valeen Schnurr’s miraculous recovery. In it, they noted that she had a confrontation with one of the killers in which she was asked the same question as Cassie Bernall

and had answered it affirmatively, as had Cassie. National media picked up the story. During the month of May, *Time* and *Newsweek* ran cover stories on the Columbine massacres that mentioned her martyrdom; feature articles on Cassie appeared in the *Weekly Standard* and Salon.com.

Word of Cassie Bernall's supposed defense of the faith and subsequent martyrdom spread through the evangelical community. Christian rock pop star Michael W. Smith recorded "This Is Your Time" in Cassie's honor. Her parents appeared on Christian talk shows, such as the 700 Club, and mainstream talk shows, such as Oprah, Today, 20/20, and Larry King Live. During their appearances, they claimed that her death was a victory of Jesus Christ over Satan and an affirmation of the family's evangelical beliefs (*Cassie Bernall—Her faith has touched us all* 1999). Cassie's story spread in youth-oriented evangelical Christian web sites and chat rooms. As stories were retold, Cassie's defense became stronger and her image became bolder in the face of her executioners; in some cases, retellings had her scolding Harris and Klebold for their lack of religious convictions.

In her early teens, Cassie Bernall, according to her hagiography, *She Said Yes*, was a troubled and difficult child. She had apparently drifted into a goth subculture and with a friend had dabbled in Satanism. Cassie had experimented with marijuana and alcohol. She was apparently depressed and had contemplated suicide. She was so alienated from her parents that she, along with her friend, fantasized about killing them. Misty Bernall found out about her daughter's musings when she was rummaging through her drawers and found letters that Cassie had received from her friend espousing Satanism and advocating the killing of one's parents. Her parents confronted Cassie, who was outraged by the violation of privacy. They grounded her, forbade her to associate with her friend, enrolled her in a Christian school, and allowed her only to participate in the youth group at West Bowles Community Christian Church. Later, she transferred to Columbine High School. They weaned her away from her old crowd. In 1997, at a youth retreat, she apparently had an epiphany, was reborn, and dedicated her life to Jesus.

Since then, the Bernalls have established the Cassie Bernall Foundation, dedicated to providing funds for evangelical youth ministries and a home for Honduran orphans. Cassie's parents have established their own ministry to spread the word about Cassie's miraculous transformation from slacker to devout Christian and to promote their "tough love" methods by which they engineered Cassie's change of heart (Bernall 1999).

Within days of the tragedy, the Bernalls were approached by a representative from Plough Publishing, a small publishing house run by the Bruderhof, a

German-based sect, and asked to write a book about Cassie's conversion and martyrdom, to which they agreed. Early in the investigation, Jefferson County sheriff detectives Randy West and Kate Battan began to have doubts about the accounts that were reported in the media when they were interviewing students in the library who could not verify the claim. Students in the proximity of Cassie Bernall had no recollection of any conversation between her and either of the shooters. Most troubling was the testimony of Emily Wyant, a friend of Cassie's, who was right next to her under the desk and testified that there was no conversation between Cassie and the killers. According to Zoba (2000), West and Battan gave the Bernalls a warning that the testimony about Cassie's behavior during the assault was conflicting. The investigators, on the basis of their interviews, concluded that there was no conversation between Cassie and the shooters and that the dialogue between Valeen Schnurr and Dylan Klebold had been misattributed to Cassie Bernall, who was killed much earlier in the assault. The representative from Plough Publishing and the Bernalls reinterviewed Joshua Lapp, Craig Scott (Rachel Scott's brother), and Evan Todd, whose testimonies in the presence of people who had a vested interest the affirmation of Cassie's defense of the faith were vaguely positive. Because of flimsiness of the evidence, Plough Publishers decided to insert the following disclaimer in their introduction to the book:

Though the precise chronology of the murderous rampage that took place at Columbine High on April 20th, 1999—including the exact details of Cassie's death—may never be known, the author's description as printed in this book is based upon the reports of numerous survivors of [the] library (the main scene of the massacre) and takes into account their varying recollections (Bernall 1999).

It is highly unlikely that Cassie Bernall died defending her faith. The investigators understood that the events in the library were chaotic and that students' memories of the events would be distorted by their own emotional responses to a highly traumatic situation in which their lives were being threatened. Therefore, they had to be very careful in their reconstruction of the events in the library. They noted the following problems with student testimonies: distortions of time, impaired observations or recall when Klebold and Harris came within close proximity of their location, difficulty recalling the events in chronological order, and the influence of media coverage on their memory of events. In essence, students viewed media reports between the incident and the police interviews that colored their reportage of the actual events. The police investigation team

concluded that such distortions were remedied by interviews of multiple persons. Because they had no interest in whether or not Cassie said “yes” and because they were sympathetic to the Bernalls, the police description of the events in the library stands as the most accurate and reliable.

Of the three conversations that Zoba claimed involved taunts about religious beliefs, only the conversation with Valeen Schnurr could be confirmed by investigators, and that was hardly a case of taunting. Neither Harris nor Klebold knew Rachel Scott or Cassie Bernall. Rachel was a year behind them in school. However, Harris and Klebold vilified a Rachel in the basement tapes. According to Judy Brown, the Rachel (along with “Jen,” both of whom sat near “Nick”) that they were identifying as “stuck up Godly whores” was in their psychology class. The reference to Rachel was mistakenly identified as Rachel Scott. According to the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department’s report (1999), Klebold and Harris were fifteen to twenty feet away from Rachel Scott and Richard Castaldo when they shot them. If the boys had said anything to Rachel Scott, they had to have shouted it. Furthermore, Richard Castaldo, who was sitting right next to Rachel and the only living witness to her murder, could not remember Klebold or Harris saying anything.

In the case of Valeen, the exchange with Klebold was confirmed by several witnesses. An important fact disregarded by the defenders of the myth of Cassie Bernall’s martyrdom was that Klebold’s questioning of Valeen about her belief in God was in response to her cries of, “Oh God, oh God,” after having been wounded. Also, according to testimony, after asking Valeen whether she believed in God, to which Valeen answered, “Yes,” Klebold did not kill her; rather, he asked, “Why,” and walked away.

No evidence exists that indicate that either boy knew Cassie Bernall or even knew that it was she who was hiding under the table. The testimony of Emily Wyant, who was the only witness to the killing of Cassie Bernall, was dismissed by Zoba because Emily was highly traumatized by the shootings. However, her testimony was maintained under pressure of the mushrooming myth and desires by believers to have her disavow her story (Cullen 1999f). The Wyant family became concerned about hostility directed at them by believers who had a vested interest in maintaining the myth. In the weeks and months following the publication of Cassie Bernall’s story, Christian ministries had reported a dramatic increase in adolescents joining their youth groups.

According to Cullen (1999f), the *Rocky Mountain News* sat on the story for several weeks, citing sensitivity to the feelings of the victim’s families for not releasing the debunking of the myth of Cassie Bernall’s martyrdom until it was

released by Salon.com over the Internet. Although Wyant had testified to the FBI about the death of Cassie Bernall and *News* reporters had known for months about the lack of a factual basis for the myth, they continued to report it as fact right up to the time that it was reported in Salon.com. The *Rocky Mountain News* was accused of unethical behavior in the treatment of the Cassie Bernall story because it feared a backlash by evangelicals.

Despite a lack of evidence of Cassie Bernall's defense of her faith in the face of the rampaging Harris and Klebold and the considerable amount of evidence indicating that the original attribution was mistaken in the chaos of library shootings, Misty and Brad Bernall, Cassie's parents, carry on their *She Said Yes* ministry. The book, *She Said Yes*, has sold over a million copies, Christian ministries still proclaim her martyrdom, and web sites dedicated to her encourage visitors to comment on her defense of the faith.

Once the myth was called into question, Bruce Porter, the Littleton evangelical minister who established Torchgrab Youth Ministry, which is dedicated to the memory of Rachel Scott, stated the following:

It matters little in the end whether or not Cassie was quoted correctly in this circumstance. The fact that so many who knew her instantly accepted the initial reports that she said "yes" is a clear indication that, without any doubt whatsoever, she would have said it! Cassie's mother, Misty Bernall, in her highly recommended book, *She Said Yes*, made it clear that Cassie said, "yes" every day (Porter 1999, 7).

In a similar vein, Dave McPherson, youth minister at West Bowles Community Church where Cassie Bernall worshiped, is quoted by Watson (2002) as saying:

The church is going to stick to the martyr story. It's the story they heard first, and circulated for six months uncontested. You can say it didn't happen that way, but the church won't accept it. To the church, Cassie will always say yes, period (159).

For the evangelicals, then, the story of Columbine has been interpreted as a vicious attack on evangelical students who became martyrs for the cause. Even though the factual basis for such claims is shaky, to say the least, what has happened is that the myth has been reprinted so many times that it has taken on a reality of its own. Among evangelicals, the martyrdom of Rachel Scott and Cassie Bernall has become an article of faith.

THE STRANGE JOURNEY OF THE CROSSES

The story of the evangelical attempt to define the Columbine shootings in their own terms would not be complete without a description of the saga of the crosses. Greg Zanis, a carpenter from Naperville, Illinois, a deeply religious man who was aware of the significance of his own occupation in Christianity, began placing wooden crosses around the country to commemorate victims of violence after he found his father-in-law murdered in 1996. His father-in-law taught him his trade, and the two were very close. The first cross he erected was in memory of his father-in-law. As he erected crosses to commemorate victims of violent crimes, he gained a reputation as a caring and compassionate healer, especially among conservative and evangelical Christians. By the time the Columbine shootings occurred, he had erected 200 crosses throughout the United States (Zoba 2000).

Brian Anderson, the student who was caught between the inner and outer doors of the west entrance of Columbine High School when Eric Harris was shooting into the school, had heard of Zanis's ministry, Crosses for Losses. He and some friends tracked down Zanis's ministry and asked him to place fifteen crosses on Rebel Hill overlooking the football field, one for each of the victims, including Harris and Klebold. As soon as Zanis received the message, he and his son purchased the wood, made the crosses, and transported them from Florida, where he was on vacation, and drove sixteen hours to Colorado. He arrived in Columbine on Tuesday, April 27, and began digging holes and placing the crosses in the holes on Rebel Hill, overlooking the play fields and the school. He was helped in his efforts by mourners who were sitting on the hill. He placed the fifteen crosses in a line, with the crosses commemorating Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris at each end.

The crosses, considered by Zanis as a symbol of Christian forgiveness, became an icon memorializing the victims of the shootings. In addition to the names of each of the dead, Zanis tied a pen to each cross so that mourners could inscribe their feelings on it. The crosses became a focal point for the mourning community. Mourners not only wrote inscriptions, but they placed flowers, toys, mementos, letters, poems, and other items that they thought were meaningful expressions of sympathy at the base of the crosses. According to Zoba (2000), 125,000 people visited the crosses during the next few days, even though most of the time it rained, and the hill became muddy and extremely slippery. Because of the uniqueness, popularity, and symbolic power of the crosses, the media latched onto them as a symbol of Columbine.

Not surprisingly, the placement of memorials for Harris and Klebold created a controversy among the mourners (Zoba 2000). On Rebel Hill, spontaneous debates broke out about the propriety of having memorials to the killers. The debates took on a religious cast. Those who opposed the inclusion of Harris and Klebold in the memorial thought it inappropriate to include the perpetrators because they were instruments of evil and should not be memorialized with innocent victims. Those who agreed with the inclusion of Harris and Klebold thought that it was a symbol of Christian forgiveness and the beginning of the process of healing the community. Some expressed the opinion that Harris and Klebold were victims of a society that lionized violence. The messages left on the crosses reflected the debate. Some mourners defaced the crosses of Harris and Klebold with messages like, “Evil bastard”; others wrote more comforting messages like, “Begin to forgive.”

The crosses for Harris and Klebold were torn down by Brian Rohrbough, the father of Daniel Rohrbough, who was shot in front of the school by Dylan Klebold. When Rohrbough found out that there were crosses commemorating the killers on Rebel Hill, he was outraged. He called the parks department and demanded that they remove the two offending crosses. When nothing was done, he called CNN, and on April 30, with the media present, he tore down Klebold’s and Harris’s crosses, cut them into pieces, and threw them into a dumpster. He then announced to the media, “We don’t build a monument to Adolf Hitler and put it in the Holocaust Museum—and it’s not going to happen here” (Zoba 2000, 49).

Zanis was very upset about the controversy surrounding the fifteen crosses and the desecration of the crosses for Harris and Klebold. He immediately drove his pickup truck from Illinois to Colorado, pulled out the crosses, and returned home. After returning home, Zanis started receiving telephone calls by the hundreds asking him to return the crosses. This act enraged Brian Rohrbough even more because he thought that Zanis should have left the thirteen crosses commemorating the victims. Rohrbough claimed that Klebold and Harris did not deserve crosses because they did not repent their sins, and because of that failure, they were going to hell.

Zanis drove eighteen hours back to Colorado, and replaced the thirteen crosses on Rebel Hill at the behest of Steve Schweitzer, a real estate developer from Littleton. The attempt to replace the crosses on the hill was to create a permanent shrine for the Columbine victims and establish a record of their story for Light Force TV, a Houston-based Christian network, which was on site filming the proceedings (Westword 1999). The Parks and Recreation Department removed them almost immediately, citing safety issues. The hill was steep, and

at that time of year it was muddy. During the previous incarnation of the crosses, many people had slipped on the hill, and one person had been pushed over the hill in an apparent dispute over whether the killers should be part of the memorial. The county did not want to be sued for negligence. Zanis was supposed to have a meeting with Bob Easton, executive director of the Foothills Park and Recreation District, concerning the placement of the crosses; however, when Zanis entered Clement Park at 8 A.M., the media person from Light Force TV whisked him away, and he never attended the meeting with Easton.

Apparently accepting Rohrbough's rationale, Zanis apologized to Rohrbough in a meeting arranged by the Light Force TV. However, Rohrbough, a confrontational man who complained that his son was actually shot by police fire and sued the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department for the wrongful death of his son, at first did not accept Zanis's apology. He shouted at Zanis and claimed that he was crazy to memorialize the killers. Finally, Zanis said to Rohrbough,

"Listen, I've asked you as a Christian brother to forgive me and you haven't. I'm tired of you yelling at me. I put up with all I can take. I'm going to pack my crosses and go back Illinois. But I want to ask you one more time, are you or are you not a Christian brother? And are you going to forgive me or not?"(Zoba 2000, 50–51)

With that, the two men embraced and Rohrbough forgave Zanis. The episode, of course, was filmed by Light Force TV. When commemorating Columbine outside Colorado, Zanis, believing that there should have been fifteen crosses, displayed fifteen, two smaller than the other thirteen.

During the interim in which the crosses were removed from Columbine, Will Ambrose of Littleton erected thirteen memorial crosses at the northern edge of Clement Park to replace those removed by Zanis. Zanis's crosses were placed within a few feet of those erected by Ambrose, creating a spectacle of twenty-six crosses in close proximity. Finally, Zanis's original thirteen crosses were permanently placed in a local cemetery in Littleton, where they can still be viewed. The second set of memorial crosses was removed.

However, that was not the end of the crosses controversy. Steve Schweitzberger claimed he had organized a fund drive to raise \$1.6 million in order to purchase Rebel Hill from the government so that they could place crosses on the hill. Even though the plan had the support of powerful members of the Columbine and Littleton political community, including U.S. Representative Don Lee (Republican), who represents Columbine's district, it never materialized.

Beginning with orations at the memorial service, a concerted effort was put forth by evangelical community to define the Columbine shootings in religious terms with Klebold and Harris as the embodiment of evil, whose innocent victims were killed because of their devotion to Christianity. Of all the books written by Christian evangelicals about the Columbine shootings, only Zoba (2000) acknowledged the possibility that one of the motivations of the boys was revenge for the bullying and harassment they received at the hands of their peers. For all the rest, Klebold and Harris were evil incarnate, and to them, evil exists *sui generis*, as an intervention of the devil into human affairs, and, therefore, needs no explanation. According to a reporter who covered the story, outspoken members of the community continually emphasized the evilness of Harris and Klebold, as if they were subhuman. This particular orientation was evidenced when this researcher asked Principal DeAngelis for his explanation as to why the boys attacked the school. The core of his response was, "They were just *evil kids*" (emphasis his).

Certainly, the attack on Columbine High School was an evil act. What the evangelical ministers and Principal DeAngelis failed to acknowledge was the role of the school and the community in the generation of that evil. In their rush to distance themselves from the acts of Harris and Klebold, and in some sense to cover themselves and deny culpability, they placed the shootings under the mantle of evil-doing, failed to ask the hard questions, and focused on the healing process without any attempt to ascertain what caused the shootings in the first place.

CHRISTIANS VERSUS CHRISTIANS

In one of the first interviews conducted for this study with a news reporter who lived in the neighborhood, I was informed that real estate agents steer evangelicals into southern Jefferson County where Columbine High School is located. The reporter also indicated that tensions existed between evangelicals and members of liberal Protestant sects. Evangelicals were characterized by this informant as arrogant and intolerant of the beliefs of others. The reporter also indicated that evangelicals viewed themselves as more Christian than non-evangelical Christians:

There is a big influence [of evangelicals in Columbine] which can be very destructive, especially in the hands of teenagers who say "we're saved." They were so smug. "We know about Jesus. Jesus loves us..." It can be vicious, hypocritical, and exclusionary (Recorded November 6, 2000).

In Columbine, non-evangelical Christians and nominal Christians were perceived by the evangelicals as insufficiently religious. Even though evangelicals are a numeric minority in southern Jefferson County, they regard themselves as the cultural elite of the territory. The testimony of this reporter seemed to be in consonance with the comments of evangelical pastors in the controversy over the memorial service held on April 25, 1999.

In addition, the evangelical community is powerful in the area and is not afraid to use its power. The reporter I interviewed stated that evangelicals often used tactics of intimidation. She stated,

Evil, evil, evil. Hate, hate, hate. There is a great separation there. There is them [the evangelicals] and there is the rest of us... Things happen to you if you speak up with a different point of view. You get hate mail and you get threats and stuff, you know. You just be quiet. You just be quiet. But I know that there are people in the community who are just heartbroken for those two boys and their families (Recorded November 6, 2000).

Liberal Protestants were also appalled by evangelicals using the tragedy for recruitment. In addition, they were upset about the superficial nostrums being proffered to grieving Columbine families by well-meaning but naïve evangelicals. Reverend Marxhausen, who, by his own testimony, has dealt with tragedy in his own life and with his parishioners, stated the following:

People would prey upon youth in the park. “Just pray to Jesus, and this’ll go away.” Hell no. God put grief into the system to remind us that we’re all important to each other, so you just can’t brush that off. Anyway, so that’s just sort of another piece of all the other pieces (Recorded April 29, 2004).

This feeling was reflected in the hesitancy of local newspapers to report information at variance with the evangelical belief that Cassie Bernall died defending her faith, the pressure placed on Emily Wynant and her family to disavow her testimony to Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office investigators, and their successful attempt to force the Lutheran minister Don Marxhausen, a vocal critic of their tactics, to leave town. An informant told this researcher that Marxhausen was “run out of town.”

Harris and Klebold were exceedingly hostile to evangelical students. In the basement videotapes they made in the days prior to the shootings, they indicated

that they were very proud of their hatred towards evangelical Christians, along with everybody else (Gibbs and Roche 1999). Zoba (2000, 131–32) retold the following conversation between Klebold and Harris from one of the tapes made prior to their rampage:

H: If we have a fucking religious war ...we need to get a chain reaction going here.... Shut the fuck up, Nick [an apparent reference to a classmate]. And those two girls sitting next to you, they probably want you to shut up, too. Rachel and Jen and whatever.

K: Stuck up little bitches, you fucking little Christianity, Godly whores.

H: Yeah, “I love Jesus, I love Jesus.” Shut the fuck up!

K: “What would Jesus do?” What would I do? Boosh! [he points his finger as if it were a gun at the camera]. [NB: “What would Jesus do” refers to bracelets that evangelical Christian girls wore with the initials WWJD engraved on them as a reminder to behave as Jesus would in any given situation.]

H: I would shoot you in the motherfucking head! Go Romans—thank God they crucified that asshole.

Both: Go Romans! Yeah!

In a slap at evangelicals, Harris apparently reconfigured the video game *Doom* so that when victims were killed, they cried out, “Lord, why is this happening to me” (Hubbard 1999).

The unasked question by evangelical writers was why Klebold and Harris were so hostile toward evangelical students. According to a friend of the two boys, the halls of Columbine High School were used by some evangelical students to proselytize their faith. In my interviews with Columbine students, most could not recall being proselytized by evangelical students. However, goth students could usually relate a story about being proselytized. They tended to be dismissive of such efforts. Brooks Brown (Brown and Merritt 2002), a nonconformist student stated the following:

I never made it a secret in high school that I wasn't a religious person, and devout Christians used to come after me and tell me I was going to hell. They would use quotes from the Bible to throw insults to me. I'd seen them try to force their beliefs on other students, guiltting them into it, pressuring them to join up. They didn't want to hear what you thought about God, or the world. All they wanted to hear was “Jesus Christ is my Savior”—and if we didn't agree we weren't worth associating with (148–49).

In a personal interview, Brooks Brown stated the following:

BB: Christians do not treat you well in this town. And I was told I needed to be saved by Jesus Christ. That I was going to Hell because I didn't. There's like maybe twenty or thirty of them. And all they did was carry around their bibles during school, their teen bible, which increases the fun of religion so much, apparently, and they'd tell us we were going to Hell. All the time, all the time, all the time. The youth group became part of the school. It did. . . . It was Youth Group, it was Young Life.

RL: [Would you explain that]?

BB: Young Life was like seriously 150 kids would go a week. It became this massive like cult, it was sick. And because I never went, I was therefore a pure sinner.

RL: I assume they [hassled] Eric and Dylan.

BB: All the time. All of us. We were more outspoken. We were in a little group and were more outspoken about the fact that we were not Christians. I haven't been a Christian since I was seven. Eric and Dylan I think had never been. Dylan I know was raised very differently, religionwise. I know his father was a Methodist, I think, and Sue was Jewish. So he was raised very openly religiously. Kind of letting him pick his own thing (Recorded May 13, 2003).

According to a student who identified himself as a conservative and an athlete, but not a jock, and as a fellow member of the debate team with Brooks Brown, the relationship between Brown and evangelicals was mutually hostile:

RL: I see. I understand, and there's a lot of evidence, and I guess you're probably familiar with it, that there was a lot of hostility on the part Klebold and Harris toward evangelicals.

J: Yeah. And I haven't seen all the stuff that came out before the shooting happened, like their website and stuff like that, because a lot of that stuff was closed down, because of the evidence stuff. But evangelical or Christian students, I never saw them harassed. I mean they would do prayers around the flagpole every so often, there was a group that the Christians belonged to called "Young Life." They all got together and did their Young Life thing—I wasn't a part of it so I don't know what happened. The Mormon students met in the house right south of the high school, where they had their seminary,

and stuff like that. Religion I really didn't feel was a big deal as far as the whole school went, whether certain people held hostilities toward religious students, that remained pretty much in their own minds, but nothing came out.

The only, only time I ever saw anybody attack somebody for their beliefs was in debate class, and a certain famous individual whom we all know, Brooks Brown, liked to disprove the theory of God. What he would do in debate class was if someone brought up, he'd do like the Lincoln-Douglas debate where they were debating ethics, and if somebody tried to use the Bible, or Christianity or something as a philosophy, in order to prove their point, he'd go and prove that God didn't exist. And he'd get these people to the point of tears. And then he'd brag about it. And that's really the only thing I saw.

RL: Did you see any proselytizing on campus?

J: Not really.

RL: Because Brooks mentioned in his book that sometimes evangelicals would chase down students and tell them that they were living in sin and would go to hell.

J: God, I never saw that!

RL: Okay.

J: I never saw that! That seems a little bit ridiculous to me. I mean, people know the boundaries, I would say. I really don't think anybody would go up to anybody else and say, "You're a sinner. You're going to hell. Repent now!" Not in high school, I mean, come on! Yeah, there were public displays of religious stuff going on, I mean like prayers around the flagpole, and Young Life meetings were sometimes announced over the announcements. But I really don't think anybody was trying to proselytize, trying to convert people right then and there. That seems a little bit over the top to me, but he's one to exaggerate, so ... (Recorded May 1, 2003).

However, J was not the only student who was aware of the Young Life Bible study group. In an interview with a group of four female students who were freshmen at the time of the shootings, the following was stated by one of the young women:

Well, I noticed in Columbine there was a youth group of very cliquy people. They were people who were in the morning Bible study. And they were very [all start laughing]. They were not nice. They were nice

if they wanted to convert you and stuff, but they were very, they were some of the worst there.... And that had nothing to do with their religion. It just came from the fact that they were in on some little secret that they were better than other people (Recorded May 13, 2003).

In the quotation above, the other girls laugh at the mention of the morning Bible study group in instant recognition and in anticipation of what was going to be said. All four young women agreed with the comments. The evangelical students, apparently infused by the teachings and attitudes of their parents and their churches, constituted themselves as a moral elite in Columbine. A student reported the following:

My little brother went with a friend of his, B.; he's a Jew, one of the three Jews that went to the school. Went to the memorial for the kids who'd [been killed] ...and the preacher actually had the gall to say that only three of the kids who were killed that day were in Heaven. They were the only born-again Christians. It makes me sick. It's not surprising (Recorded May 5, 2003).

The moral elitism of the evangelical clergy influenced the attitudes of their young parishioners. Because they perceived themselves as right and infallible in their religious beliefs, they were intolerant of other people's beliefs and were incapable of viewing alternatives to their own beliefs as having any validity. Brooks Brown, viewing himself as an iconoclast, took great pleasure in debunking their beliefs, displaying his hostility toward their moral elitism through debate and disputation. Klebold and Harris were willing to pick up the gun.

The students I talked to disliked, in addition to moral elitism, certain evangelical students for two other reasons: hypocrisy and moral rigidity. One of the girls in the group quoted above stated the following:

And I remember seeing the What Would Jesus Do? bracelets on the [evangelical] girls in the choir class, saying the meanest things about people. And I remember saying, "What's your bracelet for? Why do you wear that? It doesn't make sense" (Recorded May 13, 2003).

Another student who was quite sympathetic with evangelical students made the following observation:

What I found really interesting was that a lot of the [students] known to be Christians, some of them were very "Christian," didn't drink, didn't

have sex and all that good stuff. And those were the people that I would hang out with too, because they had the same ideals as I did.... And I respected them because they followed the rules and values and ideals of their religion. Granted, I wasn't a very religious person, but those were the same ideals that I had. But some people claimed to be religious, but basically in some way I guess it was like a title for them. Because they would go completely opposite of the ideals and values of their religion (Recorded May 5, 2003).

I had the following conversation with a student who claimed he was a former member of the Trenchcoat Mafia and is a self-defined goth:

T: Maybe the problem with the evangelicals is that they are another one of those entities in society that tries to force conformity. That's always been my problem. Anybody that tries to force their beliefs on me, I have a problem with.... You either are going to have Jesus as your savior, or you're going to Hell. Those are your only choices. We are right; you are wrong. And I really hate the word "pity," but I really pity people that can't open their minds to accept that maybe they're wrong.

RL: Or, a slightly different way, not so much they're wrong, but that other people have valid perspectives.

T: That's where I was going. I personally am a religious existentialist, so I personally believe that if you believe it, it's as true as anything else. I really don't think that anybody's wrong. At the same time, I think that I am right. I think that everybody's right (Recorded April 10, 2003).

In defense of the evangelical students, T indicated that it was a very small minority of students who actually attempted to proselytize other students. More typical was the following response from a student who was in the popular crowd:

RL: Now, according to media reports, Harris and Klebold seemed to be hostile to evangelicals. Do you know if other students shared their hostility toward evangelical students?

AM: No. I've never heard anything like that. I've never heard that from regular students; I've never heard about anybody that was part of the Trenchcoat Mafia or anything like that. I've never heard anything like that....

RL: Oh, okay. And did you ever witness evangelical students telling other students that if they didn't [believe in Jesus], they were born again that they would go to Hell?

AM: No. There were definitely church groups at the school but they definitely hung out with one another and there was never any preaching or anything like that, to anybody else that I saw (Recorded May 20, 2003).

Similar to the harassment, efforts to proselytize tended to occur underneath the radar of members of the leading crowd. Although such acts occurred rarely, what seems to be more important was the attitude of certain evangelical students of their moral superiority by virtue of the fact that they were members of evangelical sects, regardless of their personal behaviors.

Although many evangelicals may be humble and focus their lives on doing good deeds, the response of that community to the Columbine shootings revealed a darker side of aggression and intolerance. People who disagreed with them were intimidated, memorial services for the larger community were subverted in efforts to proselytize and spread evangelism, and efforts were made to scapegoat political liberalism as a cause of the tragedy. Given the mind-set of evangelicals, it is not surprising that they failed to look within their own community for causes of the Columbine shootings.

MORAL ELITISM

Ironically, Harris and Klebold saw themselves as morally superior to mere mortals in an almost Nietzschean view. In the videotapes made by the boys prior to their rampage, Klebold stated the following (Zoba 2000): "I know we're gonna have followers because we're so fucking godlike. We're not exactly human—we have human bodies but we've evolved into one step above you fucking shit. We have fucking self-awareness" (131–32).

Apart from his megalomania, it seems as if Klebold had appropriated the self-righteousness and moral superiority of the evangelicals. Harris and Klebold had apparently convinced themselves of their evolution into superhumans who could sit in judgment of others. The intolerance that Harris and Klebold showed toward not just evangelicals but to all others is a mirror image of the intolerance of evangelicals toward those who do not believe as they do. Although certainly not the prime cause of the Columbine shootings, the intolerance of evangelical students in Columbine contributed to the anger and hatred evinced by the boys.

In an ironic twist, the moral elitism evidenced by the evangelicals was incorporated by Klebold and Harris into a justification for their murderous rampage.

It is not surprising that as evangelicals assumed the mantle of moral superiority in Columbine and used the mass media to proselytize, that their children would accost their peers and tell them that if they were not born-again, they would burn in hell. In most cases, this would be merely annoying. However, in combination with the brutalization and harassment dished out on a regular basis by the school athletes, it only added to the toxicity of the student climate at Columbine High School.